

If City Won't Follow Guidelines, then Why Adopt Them?

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***** Note: Figures may be missing from this format of the document**

Article:

Imagine that you've started a diet because you know you need to lose a little weight for your long-term health. But suppose you frequently break the diet when you're tempted by tasty and fattening foods.

Clearly, such a diet isn't worth much. It won't deliver on its healthful potential, and eventually the very act of going on a diet would seem highly dubious.

Now imagine that your city has established guidelines for planned growth because people believe that good planning has the best chance of fulfilling your community's long-term goals. But suppose the city's decision-makers frequently break with the plan.

Clearly, such a plan isn't worth much. It won't deliver on its socioeconomic potential, and eventually the very act of devising urban plans would seem highly dubious.

The diet scenario is hypothetical. Unfortunately, the planning scenario is a rough description of recent events in Greensboro.

For example, last year the City Council accepted the Planning Department's corridor plan for Pisgah Church Road. But the very first time the Council had a chance to uphold the plan, it voted otherwise.

Last May it approved a townhouse development on Pisgah Church Road west of Willoughby Blvd. Just a few months ago it voted in favor of a retail and office complex on N. Elm St. near Pisgah Church. Each of these projects ran directly counter to the corridor plan.

And it's not just the Pisgah Church plan being ignored. As recently as Jan. 10, the Zoning Commission voted to allow a development at Freeman Mill Rd. and Lovett St. that violated the Freeman Mill Rd. corridor plan.

Some Council members have taken pains to point out that the Council merely "accepts" these corridor plans and has never "approved" them, a distinction that seems largely semantic.

But the distinction must be real to the Council, as the city has violated its three corridor plans (the third plan covers New Garden Road) as often as it has upheld them. Should urban development be reduced to a coin flip?

What's next? More planning. Throughout last fall's municipal election campaigns, most candidates for city office agreed that we need a comprehensive city-wide plan. City manager Ed Kitchen wrote recently in the News & Record about the complexities of designing one. It appears that comprehensive urban planning is in our future.

My question is: Why bother? Having a plan that is so often ignored is little better than having no plan at all. It invites cynicism and devalues local government in the public's mind. Having *no* plan is at least honest.

What's going on here is a dilemma not unknown in the study of economics and policy. It's easy to lay out a policy for long-term reasons, but it's harder to stick to that policy.

In fact, violating the policy in particular instances often appears to make sense. But if the long-term plan is sound, the short-term gains from violating it are illusory.

For example, the U.S. has long favored free trade as a cornerstone of its foreign economic policy. And yet the U.S. often lobbies for exceptions to trade agreements it has signed, even though doing so risks the long-term viability of the treaties themselves.

In urban planning as well, exceptions set precedents that threaten the overall policy. Just days after the Zoning Commission approved the Lovett St. development on Freeman Mill Rd., for-sale signs appeared on some adjoining properties. From the standpoint of property owners, it's not crazy to imagine the city making another exception to its corridor plan.

This possibility leads to speculative increases in the value of adjoining properties, which in turn generate more interest among property owners and developers. As real-estate prices in the area rise, the area's *apparent* economic viability catches the attention of local government. Further contradictions to the plan become more and more likely, even if the benefits are short-term.

So the initial exception can set off a vicious circle that undoes the plan's intended effects. This likelihood can be avoided entirely by sticking to the plan in the first place.

It would be easy to blame our Zoning Commissioners and City Council members, but the problem isn't the people. The problem is the system. The planning process in Greensboro is such that the Planning Department's recommendations carry no legal weight. And so far no political pressure has emerged to ensure adherence to the recommendations.

The solution is simple. Greensboro's urban plans need to have the same force as city ordinances. Perhaps the occasional exception would still be possible, but only with a super-majority voting in favor of it. The opportunity for public comment, which was made available during the writing of the city's three corridor studies, would continue to be an essential part of the process.

Ultimately, there has to be political accountability for how Greensboro's plans get implemented. We keep hearing that the type of growth matters to folks in Greensboro.

Everyone says they oppose urban sprawl. But if voters don't care about urban plans that are ignored as often as followed, then they deserve what they get: growth that often seems unplanned and random. Sort of like a coin flip.